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Items for discussion and decision: statistics of human development

Report of the United Nations Development Programme on statistics of human development

Note by the Secretary-General

In response to a request made by the Statistical Commission at its forty-second session (see E/2011/24, chap. I.A, decision 42/110), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on statistics of human development. The report shows the commitment of the Human Development Report Office of UNDP to addressing the concerns that were raised by Member States at the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission. It provides an account of the concrete steps taken and the processes and structures set in place to improve the constructive engagement with Member States and the global statistical community with regard to the measurement of human development and to support greater transparency in the production of the 2011 and future editions of the *Human Development Report*. The Commission may wish to review these procedures and processes.

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Report of the United Nations Development Programme on statistics of human development

I. Introduction

1. At its forty-second session, the Statistical Commission discussed statistics of human development. The Commission considered a paper prepared by the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),[1] as well as the report of the Bureau of the Commission on statistics of human development (E/CN.3/2011/14) and the report of Brazil, Morocco and South Africa on the concern expressed by some Member States about the indicators released by United Nations agencies (E/CN.3/2011/16).

2. The Commission considered a range of concerns, including a perceived lack of transparency and consultations, discrepancies between national and international sources of data and the omission of some States from the 2010 Human Development Index.

3. On 20 May 2011, in response to the request contained in paragraph (j) of Commission decision 42/110, the Human Development Report Office sent a note to the Commission outlining the steps it was taking to address the concerns raised. In the note, the Office listed the specific activities already taken and the processes and structures put in place to improve the constructive engagement with Member States and the global statistical community with regard to the measurement of human development. The Office has institutionalized these procedures to provide full transparency regarding the statistical sources and measures used in the production of the 2011 and future editions of the *Human Development Report*.

4. Section III of the present report contains information on the actions taken to address the specific requests and recommendations outlined in Commission decision 42/110. Section IV provides an overview of current and future activities. The Commission will also be presented with a background document that includes the 2011 report calendar, the composition and minutes of the meeting held by the statistical advisory panel in 2011, a list of consultations and meetings, a copy of the letter addressed to national statistical offices (with its annexes), a copy of the initial letter to countries not listed in the Human Development Index, a copy of the final letter to countries not listed in the 2011 Human Development Index and a copy of the letter addressed to national statistical offices about mean years of schooling.

II. Background

5. In its resolution 57/264, the General Assembly affirmed that the *Human Development Report* is a separate and distinct exercise which is not an official document of the United Nations. The Executive Board of UNDP, in its decision 94/15, referred to the editorial independence of the report. The Commission has explicitly recognized that UNDP is not a data collection entity and that the *Human Development Report* is an editorially independent report commissioned and published by UNDP.

[1] Available at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc11/BG-HDRO.pdf.

6. During the preparations for the *Human Development Report 2010* and with measurement innovations under consideration, the Human Development Report Office requested that an item on the report be included in the agenda of the forty-first session of the Commission, in 2010, but consideration of the item was deferred to 2011. Nevertheless, in 2010 the Commission established an expert group to examine proposed changes to the report's Human Development Index. The 12-member expert group held a one-day meeting with the Office on 24 March 2010 and issued a set of conclusions and recommendations.

7. The Office incorporated the recommendations of the expert group into the *Human Development Report 2010* to the extent possible, including by fully disclosing, in the report and/or on the Office's website, all the sources of the data and the methodologies used in the report's indices, by avoiding imputations whenever possible and by using official statistical series. The expert group had also recommended that the dialogue between the Office and the official statistical community be improved, as a means to further refine the conceptual and methodological basis of the Human Development Index, and that UNDP reactivate the statistical advisory panel for the report.

8. In addition, during 2010 the Office communicated with the expert group, as reflected in the detailed feedback it provided to the group's preliminary report (dated 30 March) and the preliminary and final responses it provided to the group's final report (dated 1 July and 15 September). Through these communications, the Office not only provided information on the measures it was taking to incorporate the group's recommendations but also kept the group informed about ongoing methodological changes and considerations, as requested by the group.

III. Follow-up to Statistical Commission decision 42/110

9. The Human Development Report Office is committed to maintaining constructive engagement with the statistical authorities of Member States. Several initiatives have been taken to implement paragraphs (e) to (j) of Commission decision 42/110, as summarized in the annex to the present report.

10. Several actions have been taken to increase the transparency of the process of preparing the *Human Development Report*, through better communication with Member States and the official statistics community and the re-establishment of the statistical advisory panel. More systematic communications with Member States on data and indicator-related issues have also been established with the objective of assuring the quality and expanding the country coverage of the Human Development Index.

Communications with national statistical offices

11. Communications have been enhanced to strengthen transparency and effectively address areas of concern, particularly the discrepancy between national and international data. The Human Development Report Office informed all national statistical offices about the indicators and the sources of the data that would be used in the tables of the *Human Development Report 2011*, the calendar for the finalization of the tables and the initiatives to calculate mean years of schooling for

the Human Development Index in order to improve country coverage.[2] The letter was also sent to the regional economic commissions, the secretariat of the Caribbean Community and the secretariat of the Pacific Community. The text of the letter will be included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above. Similar letters will be sent for the preparation of future editions of the report.

12. To address the requests contained in Commission decision 42/110, the calendar for the preparation of the report was shared with all national statistical offices and will be included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above. The calendar includes key target dates in terms of production, communications and consultations and review.

13. Interactions with national statistical offices have been enhanced in several ways, as set out below, including with respect to the sources of data used and the countries covered in the Human Development Index.

Statistical advisory panel

14. The statistical advisory panel was reactivated in March 2011. It consists of six senior members of national statistical agencies, three senior members of international statistical agencies, one director of a leading policy think tank and four academics who are leading international experts in quantitative development research. The panel held its first meeting on 14 April and agreed on a mandate to provide advice and feedback to the Human Development Report Office with respect to (a) the overall methodology and indicators for the composite indices that were used in the *Human Development Report 2011* and that will continue to be used in subsequent reports; (b) the conceptual value, appropriateness and statistical quality of other indicators in the statistical annex; (c) effective interactions between data providers and other statistical stakeholders; and (d) any other specific questions related to the statistical content of the *Human Development Report*.

15. The statistical advisory panel complements both the general advisory panel for the *Human Development Report* — which is focused on providing advice and feedback on the narrative and analysis in the report — and the expert group on the Human Development Index, which, as noted above, has undertaken detailed technical reviews and discussions of statistics and processes related to the *Human Development Report*.[3]

16. The discussion held by the statistical advisory panel in April focused on the estimates for mean years of schooling and gross national income (GNI) in purchasing power parity constant terms. The panel supported the updating of the mean years of schooling by the Human Development Report Office as an appropriate interim step and welcomed the proposed long-term solution based on collaboration with the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The panel reviewed and endorsed the proposed methodology for computing GNI, including the methodology that had been discussed with the statistical authorities of Cuba. It was underlined that missing values should only be estimated for a maximum of one indicator per

[2] The letter was sent through the Statistical Division, the permanent missions to the United Nations and the UNDP country offices between 24 and 27 March.

[3] The Bureau of the Statistical Commission decided not to hold a meeting of the expert group in 2011.

country, that sensitivity analysis should be applied to all models and that the models and results should be communicated to concerned countries.

17. The list of members, as well as the agenda and a summary of the meeting of the statistical advisory panel held in 2011, will be included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above. The panel is expected to hold a meeting on 25 February 2012, in advance of the forty-third session of the Statistical Commission. In line with a letter from the Commission dated 16 September 2011, in 2012 the panel will have eight members from developing countries, two members from developed countries, two members from international organizations (the World Bank and UNESCO) and one representative from academia. The meeting to be held on 25 February will be co-chaired by Enrico Giovannini, President of the Italian National Institute for Statistics, and Anthony Atkinson, Professor at Oxford University, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Use of official statistics

18. In recognition of the concerns expressed about the use of unofficial estimates of mean years of schooling in the Human Development Index, discussions are under way between the Human Development Report Office and UNESCO about the compilation of data on mean years of schooling. The fact that the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has committed itself to investigating the feasibility of producing these estimates for 2012 is welcomed. In 2011, the Institute for Statistics updated its database on the educational attainment of the adult population with data from many countries reporting new census data.[4] Using the newly available data on educational attainment, the Office updated the estimates of mean years of schooling for 34 countries and made them available on its website on 10 July 2011. A letter was sent to all national statistical offices informing them that the estimates had been posted on the website. The text of that letter will be included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above.

Consultations, workshops and meetings

19. Several events have been organized and hosted by the Human Development Report Office since the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission in order to make the processes of preparing and acquiring data even more transparent. A full list of the events is included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above. Among the events were the following:

(a) In February 2011, delegates to the forty-second session of the Statistical Commission from countries not included in the 2010 Human Development Index because of missing data and statistical advisers from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Caribbean Community, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the secretariat of the Pacific Community attended a meeting to discuss ways to ensure that relevant and available international data are communicated to the Human Development Report Office;

(b) A two-week human development course on the theme of measurement, organized by the Human Development Report Office, was held in March 2011 in Oxford, United Kingdom. The course brought together 43 policymakers, national

[4] The data are available from http://stats.uis.unesco.org.

statisticians, UNDP staff and experts representing 30 countries.[5] At the course, participants were provided with information on the development, calculation and analysis of the new indices and on other changes introduced in the *Human Development Report 2010*. The course also provided an opportunity to test guidance materials on the revised and new indices;

(c) Engagement with national statistical offices, including those invited to regional events coordinated by the Office and bilateral meetings, has expanded;

(d) A number of regional workshops on human development concepts and measurements have taken place. From 9 to 11 May, in Doha, a workshop jointly organized by the Qatar Statistics Authority and ESCWA was held for the six States members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. At the workshop, recommendations were made on the harmonization among Council member States of statistics relevant for human development, on the need to reduce discrepancies between national and international data, on making household survey data available for international comparison and analysis and on building the capacity of national statistical offices to produce and analyse statistics relevant for human development. A similar workshop was held in Kigali from 21 to 24 June, to which the representatives of the national statistical offices of countries neighbouring Rwanda had been invited.[6] A teleconference/workshop on human development statistics was held with the heads of national statistical offices of the States members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States on 19 October 2011.

20. Despite its limited staff, the Human Development Report Office has given priority to attending and participating in regional and international gatherings of statisticians. Each of these occasions has provided valuable opportunities for Office staff to meet with official statisticians and solicit feedback. Recent events have included the conference entitled "Statistics for policymakers: Europe 2020", organized by Eurostat (10 and 11 March); the tenth meeting of the Executive Committee of the ECLAC Statistical Conference of the Americas (6-8 April); the fifty-ninth plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians (14-16 June); and the sixth meeting of the ECLAC Statistical Conference of the Americas (16-18 November).

21. As a follow-up to the tenth meeting of the Executive Committee of the ECLAC Statistical Conference of the Americas, on 16 May the Human Development Report Office held a teleconference with the expert group for the Human Development Index established by ECLAC.[7] Participants discussed a range of issues related to the measurement of human development, indicators used in the Human Development Index (in particular the use of GNI) and the role of cross-country regression models for the estimation of missing values. The discrepancy between national and international data was discussed and the Human Development Report Office agreed to conduct an additional comparison of international sources.

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[5] The following countries were represented at the meeting: Algeria, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, India, Iraq, Jamaica, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Portugal, Qatar, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Gambia, Uganda, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam.

[6] Summaries of the events are available from http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2011.

[7] The expert group consisted of the heads of national statistical offices and representatives of Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, as well as the ECLAC Statistical Division.

The report of the expert group and a summary of the teleconference were presented and discussed at the sixth meeting of the Statistical Conference of the Americas, when the Office informed the Conference about the steps taken, the procedures put in place and its commitment to continue the dialogue with national and international statistical authorities.

22. The Office fully endorses the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities, and will continue, as a user of data produced by other international statistical organizations, to apply the relevant principles.[8]

Reducing discrepancies between data from national and international sources

23. The Human Development Report Office relies on data from mandated international organizations. It is well known that there are sometimes discrepancies between data from such organizations and data reported by States. For example, with regard to the indicators of the Millennium Development Goals, enormous efforts are made by the Inter-agency and Expert Group for Millennium Development Goals Indicators to reconcile national and international data. Several discrepancies were pointed out by Member States in their report to the Statistical Commission, and, in paragraph (e) (ii) of its decision 42/110, the Commission noted such discrepancies. While the Office has neither the mandate nor the resources to reconcile national and international data, it encourages efforts to reduce such discrepancies and improve the quality of all officially reported statistics in the United Nations system. In a letter dated 25 March 2011, the Office asked national statistical offices to bring any discrepancies they had noticed to the attention of the international agencies concerned and to inform it of gaps and differences. In cases where a discrepancy is evident, the practice of the Office has always been to inform the relevant international data provider. In addition, it has been taking the following steps to address this systemic problem:

(a) Informing national statistical offices in advance about the data sources to be used;

(b) Undertaking a systematic comparison of possible sources for indicators considered for the tables in the *Human Development Report 2011*.

Improved country coverage

24. The Human Development Report Office has always aimed to cover as many countries as possible in the Human Development Index while, as noted above, avoiding, to the extent possible, the estimation of missing values. Every year some countries are omitted from the Index because the relevant indicators are not available. In 2011, the Office started giving the affected countries advance notice of such omission.

25. Consistent with this new practice, on 7 April the Office informed some national statistical offices that the inadequacy of the international official data for one or more indicators may have prevented the inclusion of their country in the Human Development Index for 2011. The letter included a proposal for possible

[8] Available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/FP-English.htm and http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/Principles_stat_activities/principles_stat_activities.htm.

estimation, subject to the advice of the statistical advisory panel and the expert group of the Statistical Commission.[9] Antigua and Barbuda and Saint Kitts and Nevis, as well as the Occupied Palestinian Territory, among others, replied agreeing with the suggested approach. Another notification to States affected by the missing indicators was sent on 1 July. Examples of the letters will be included in the background document mentioned in paragraph 4 above.

26. A communication channel with the Small Island Developing States Unit of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat has been established to expedite the provision of education and income indicators for small island developing States.

27. All estimated values of missing indicators were communicated to the national statistical offices concerned, together with the methods used for their computation. The values and the methods were posted on the website of the Human Development Report Office for fast and easy access and review. States have had an opportunity to review the values and, if the method was believed to be suboptimal, to propose a clearly documented alternative, to be reviewed by the Office and the statistical advisory panel.

28. The tenth meeting of the Executive Committee of the ECLAC Statistical Conference of the Americas provided an opportunity for the President of the National Statistical Office of Cuba to agree on a model for estimating a purchasing power parity conversion rate for GNI, the unavailability of which was the sole reason for the omission of Cuba from the Human Development Index in 2010. A method was agreed with the authorities, as confirmed in follow-up communications with Ileana Nuñez Mordoche, the Director of the Ministry for Foreign Trade, and subsequently endorsed by the statistical advisory panel.

29. The data sources in the *Human Development Report 2011* are more clearly labelled and the report includes notes about methodologies. Where appropriate, clarifications regarding the sources are provided, especially with respect to the use of unofficial data. The data in future editions of the report will be presented in the same way.

30. The Human Development Report Office is continuously reviewing the standards and practices for presenting references and specific notes that are not part of the regular definition of indicators. The technical notes on composite indices were amended to better explain all the procedures used to obtain estimates, including those related to missing indicators.[10]

31. The human development measurement primer published in 2007 is being updated to reflect the new human development indices and their applicability at the national level and to provide guidelines and tools for human development research, analysis and advocacy. The target audience includes people working on national and regional human development reports. These will become publicly available in English early in 2012.

[9] The letter was sent to the national statistical offices of the countries concerned, their permanent missions to the United Nations and the UNDP country offices on 7 April 2011.

[10] Available from http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/indices.

IV. Future activities related to the implementation of Statistical Commission decision 42/110

32. The Human Development Report Office will continue to engage with the international statistical community on the choice and quality of indicators, as outlined above. The first meeting of the statistical advisory panel in 2012 is scheduled to be held on 25 February. At the request of the members of the panel, a short lunchtime meeting with national statisticians from ECLAC countries is expected to be held during the same week of the session of the Statistical Commission, also in February.

33. In addition, the Office is organizing a conference on measuring progress in development, to be held on 26 January 2012, with the objective of advancing the discussion on measuring progress, focusing on the critical review of the family of human development indices and their validity from policy and conceptual perspectives.

34. The above-mentioned mechanisms — aimed at enhancing consultation and communications, improving transparency during the preparation of the *Human Development Report* and the establishment of formal channels of dialogue with the official statistical community — are now in place and will continue to be strengthened during preparations for the 2012 and future editions of the *Human Development Report*, subject to feedback and improvements over time. The Director and staff of the Human Development Report Office remain available for any questions and continue to welcome opportunities for bilateral discussions with Member States on the use of data and other matters related to the report.

V. Point for discussion

35. The Commission may wish to review the procedures and processes set out in the present report.

Annex

Steps taken by the Human Development Report Office to address Statistical Commission decision 42/110

Relevant section of Statistical Commission decision 42/110	*Follow-up action taken by the Human Development Report Office*	*Relevant paragraph of the present report*
(e) The Statistical Commission expressed deep regret and strong dissatisfaction that the Human Development Report Office did not respond adequately to the recommendations of the expert group on the Human Development Index with respect to the quality and availability of data for the chosen indicators, the use of non-official source data and the need to hold extensive consultation with the global statistical community prior to the release of the 2010 report	The recommendations of the expert group have been followed with respect to: • Transparency of data sources and methodologies used • Avoidance of imputations where possible • Use of official statistical series • Improved dialogue with the official statistical community • Reactivation of the statistical advisory panel	Para. 7
The Commission noted further in this context the following issues:		
(i) That some countries were omitted from the *Human Development Report* on the grounds of lack of data and that the national statistical offices were not informed prior to the decision to omit them;	When relevant indicators are not available, countries have been omitted from the Human Development Index. The Human Development Report Office has started notifying affected countries in advance.	Para. 25
(ii) That there were discrepancies between the data contained in the *Human Development Report* and the data available from national sources, as well as discrepancies between data published by different United Nations agencies;	Discrepancies in the data are recognized as a major issue and the Office has proposed measures to address the issue.	Para. 23
	To shift towards using official estimates of mean years of schooling in the Human Development Index, the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has committed itself to investigating the feasibility of producing those estimates for 2012.	Para. 18
(iii) That non-official data were used, in which case the Commission emphasized that when official data are not available, non-official data should be used, but only after consultation on the quality and accuracy of the data has been undertaken with the respective national statistical offices and that detailed explanations of the sources and methodologies used should be provided;	The Office is committed to improving the way in which data are presented and sources are explained.	Para. 29

Relevant section of Statistical Commission decision 42/110	*Follow-up action taken by the Human Development Report Office*	*Relevant paragraph of the present report*
(f) The Commission stressed the relevance of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and of the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities to the issue at hand and urged the United Nations Development Programme to review the Principles and subscribe to them, and in this context encouraged the United Nations Development Programme, in order to improve coordination, to play an active role in forums such as the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities;	The Office fully endorses the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the Principles Governing International Statistical Activities.	Para. 22
(g) The Commission recognized that while the choice of the theme and of the indicators for the *Human Development Report* is the prerogative of the United Nations Development Programme, the issue of data quality and adequacy falls within the purview of the Commission on behalf of the global statistical system and prior consultation is necessary;	The Commission regularly reviews the Human Development Index, its components and other aspects related to data quality and statistical inference.	Para. 5
	The Commission has recognized that the United Nations Development Programme is not a data collection entity and that the *Human Development Report* is not an official document of the United Nations, in line with General Assembly resolution 57/264.	Para. 5
(h) The Commission reiterated the need for the United Nations Development Programme to be fully transparent in its methods of statistical work in preparing the *Human Development Report* and called for consultation with all parties concerned;	The Office has made significant efforts to strengthen the transparency of the process of preparing and collecting data for the *Human Development Report*, including by:	Para. 19
	• Re-establishing the statistics advisory panel	Para. 14
	• Meeting with Commission delegates from countries not included in the 2010 Human Development Index	Para. 19 (a)
	• Holding a two-week human development course on measurement in March 2011, which brought together 43 policymakers, national statisticians, staff of the United Nations Development Programme and experts from 30 developing countries	Para. 19 (b)
	• Holding or planning to hold 38 regional- or national-level consultations, to which national statistical offices are usually invited	Para. 19 (c)

Relevant section of Statistical Commission decision 42/110	*Follow-up action taken by the Human Development Report Office*	*Relevant paragraph of the present report*
	• **Jointly organizing workshops on the human development concept and on measurement, including for the States of the Gulf Cooperating Council, in Qatar, and sub-Saharan Africa, in Rwanda**	**Para. 19 (d)**
	• Attending and participating in major regional and international gatherings of statisticians	Para. 20
	• Including clearly labelled data sources and methodological notes in the *Human Development Report 2011*	Para. 30
(i) The Commission stressed the continuing role of the expert group on the Human Development Index established by the Commission, and mandated it to continue work in reviewing the issues arising from its first report;	The statistical advisory panel was reactivated on the recommendation of the expert group of the Commission.	Para. 14
	The Office has expressed its willingness to meet with the expert group to discuss methodological and data-related issues.	Footnote 6
(j) The Commission requested the United Nations Development Programme to:		
(i) Report back to the Commission within three months on the issues raised in the present decision;	The requested report, in which the steps that have been taken by the Office and its commitment to addressing all of the Commission's concerns were outlined, was submitted on time.	Para. 3
(ii) Establish a calendar for the various preparatory phases for the *Human Development Report*, and disseminate the calendar to national statistical offices or national coordinating agencies so that they are informed about the sources of statistical data and the methods used in the report and about ways to address potential concerns and facilitate their resolution;	The Office has provided all national statistical offices and regional economic commissions with a calendar outlining all the steps leading to the finalization of the tables for 2011.	Para. 11
	The calendar includes key milestones relating to production, communications, consultations and review.	Para. 12
(iii) Consult in advance with Member States when reviewing the statistical data required for the indicators to be used for the *Human Development Report*;	The Office wrote to all national statistical offices to inform them about the indicators and data sources used for the tables in the *Human Development Report 2011*.	Para. 11
	See also the steps outlined above under subparagraph (e).	Para. 25

Relevant section of Statistical Commission decision 42/110	*Follow-up action taken by the Human Development Report Office*	*Relevant paragraph of the present report*
(iv) Establish a communication plan with national statistical offices on the use and adequacy of non-official national data, in cases where official national data are not available;	The Office informed the national statistical offices in countries where the inadequacy of the data may prevent their inclusion in the *Human Development Report 2011* and proposed estimation methodologies.	Para. 25
	Follow-up notifications were sent on 1 July.	Para. 23
	All missing value estimations were shared with national statistical offices for review.	Para. 27
	The Office met with the President of the National Statistical Office of Cuba to agree on a model for estimating a purchasing power parity conversion rate for gross national income.	Para. 28